

Reproducing Gender Inequality: A Critical Discourse Analysis of a Turkish Adult Literacy Textbook¹

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Key Findings

Adult education curricula such as literacy textbooks present blueprints for living, including different ways of being and relating as men and women. However, educators and scholars seldom consider the underlying assumptions about gender in literacy workbooks, especially in international settings. This study used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how a new, prominent adult literacy textbook in Turkey depicted male and female identities. The textbook promoted two main gender Discourses, or sets of ideas and values. The normative parenting Discourse suggested that mothers are chiefly responsible for childrearing and caretaking and that fathers are responsible for discipline. The sexual division of labor Discourse depicted men mainly in the public, outside world and women in the private, domestic sphere. By reinforcing dominant ideas of masculinity and femininity, the text implies that these roles—and gender inequities—are normal and desirable.

Key Implications

This study highlights the inherently political nature of literacy curricula and the ways that educational materials both reflect and shape social, economic, and political conditions. Adult educators should critically examine (a) the kinds of male and female identities conveyed by the words and images in curricular materials and (b) how these ideals reinforce and/or challenge gender inequality in the family, workplace, education, and other spheres. In other words, how do the textbooks and other classroom materials open up or foreclose new possibilities for men's and women's roles? Educators should also provide opportunities for learners to reflect on the ideologies presented in the curricular materials, while also using them to teach content.

Introduction

The persistence of gender inequity in Turkey and around the globe warrants closer scrutiny of gender ideologies in literacy texts. The purpose of this study was to examine how a new adult literacy textbook in Turkey depicts the identities of men and women. Critical Discourse Analysis was used to analyze how gender roles and identities were portrayed in visual images and reading passages. This topic is important because the People's Education Centers (PECs), the state-funded adult education provider in Turkey, adopted this textbook as the primary curriculum in 2008. Thus, it will profoundly shape the gender identities that thousands of adult learners envision for themselves, their children, and others. The study can also help educators in other countries understand how adult education curricula convey explicit and implicit messages that perpetuate and/or question existing gender inequalities.

Background and Methods

In 2008, the Turkish Ministry of National Education published a new adult literacy textbook and student workbook, *Yetişkinler Okuma Yazma Öğretimi ve Temel Eğitimi Kitabı* (*Textbook for Teaching Literacy and Basic Education*, Keskin, et al., 2008). Sponsored by the Support to Basic Education Program, a result of cooperation between the European Union (EU) and the Turkish Ministry of National Education, the curriculum aimed to improve access to education, especially for women, and to increase the quality of formal and non-formal education (EU, 2007). The following research questions guided the study: How does the text construct ideal

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male and female identities? How does the text reinforce or challenge prevailing conceptions of gender in Turkey?

We used Critical Discourse Analysis (Gee, 2005) because it is well-suited to analyzing how language and symbols produce ideologies, or taken-for-granted ideas about how the world is and ought to be. Following Gee (2005), *Discourse* in this study refers both to language and cultural models, that is, “ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular socially recognizable identity” (p. 21) such as “woman” or “father.” The linguistic aspects of Discourses (e.g., reading passages) are known as *discourse*.

Analysis began with identification of themes such as family, workplace, or health in the textbook’s 54 reading passages and poems. Segments of text that (a) included more than one sentence and (b) were organized around the same theme(s) were selected for further analysis. Gee’s (2005, p. 15) analytical strategy of listing other ways a sentence could have been written was used to identify alternatives and possible reasons a passage was written in a particular way. The 339 photographs and drawings were placed in one of two groups: (a) those depicting an interaction between two or more people or (b) those showing only artifacts or only one person. We paid special attention to the latter since they provided clues regarding gender interactions. Depictions of women and men in the textbook were compared to traditional Turkish gender identities associating men with paid work and the public sphere and women with caretaking work and the private sphere (O’Neill & Guler, 2009).

Findings

We found two normative gender Discourses, and relating to parenting and the other to the sexual division of labor in the household and society (Moser, 1993).

Parenting Discourse

Of the 339 visual images, 70 (21%) depicted interactions among people. In every instance where a child, toddler, or baby appears, s/he is portrayed next to a woman, possibly a mother, older sister, or other relative or caretaker (see Figure 1). Of the 16 images

where children are interacting with others, all but two (88%) include an adult female. When a family is pictured, both a man and woman appear with the children. Not one image, however, depicts a father spending time with a child or attending to his or her needs. These results suggest that mothers are—and should be—mainly responsible for raising children, a view that reinforces contemporary gender ideologies in Turkey (O’Neill & Guler, 2009).

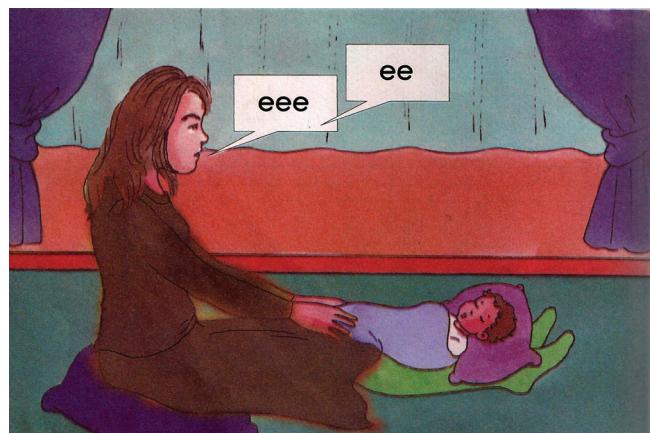


Figure 1: Women as caretakers

In “Rights and Responsibilities,” a passage about a family that is relocating for the man’s job, the father is described as the disciplinarian. Instead of listening to their mother’s request to assist with packing, the children ignore and talk back to her, saying, “What’s your problem this early in the morning?” They start packing for the move only when the father threatens to cut their allowance and “playing privileges.” The text states that the children “did not have the courage to ask [their father] the reason”; they simply obeyed. The father is depicted as the family authority figure, paralleling traditional Turkish notions of masculinity.

Sexual Division of Labor Discourse

The second Discourse portrays men as the household breadwinners and in public settings, whereas women are mainly shown in closed spaces. For example, men are shown outside performing activities such as doing construction work (see Figure 2), selling merchandise in the market, working in a factory, or picking trash in a forest. On the other hand, women are mainly depicted in the kitchen, sitting around a table and eating, watching TV, attending to a baby, shopping in

the market place, walking on the street, and kissing an elder's hand (a sign of respect) at a family gathering. Such depictions are congruent with traditional Turkish conceptions of men as devoted to work in the public sphere and women as caretakers in the private sphere.

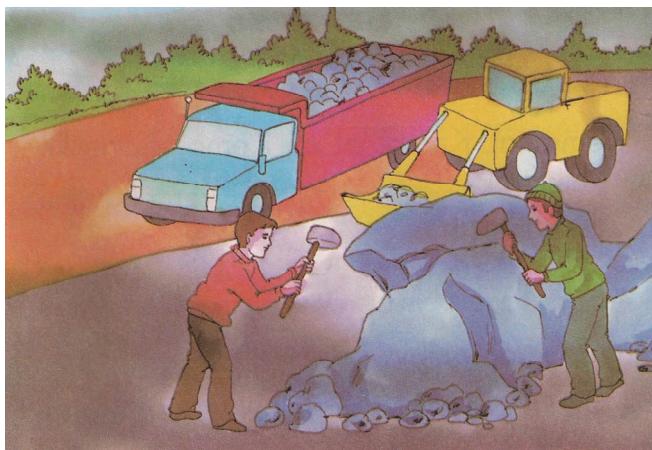


Figure 2: Men as workers

Women's roles as housewives and caretakers is also reinforced by the reading passages. Three passages describe women cooking for their "mates." In one passage, Çiçek makes strawberry jam (*reçel*) to surprise her husband, who during breakfast the day before murmured, "I wish there was *reçel*." In the passage about Pınar, who cooks leek for her "mate," the husband's contribution to dinner is limited to setting the table with his wife. Men's limited role in cooking is exemplified well in a third reading passage in which Abdi (the man) asks Birsen (the woman) to make a salad to have with their green beans. Birsen responds, "Wash the tomatoes. You should make the salad." In these passages, Turkish men expect their spouses to cook for them. However, they have changed slightly as they now help their wives set the table and occasionally make the salad. With their detailed descriptions of cooking, the texts on leek and strawberry jam read more like recipes, suggesting that an underlying purpose may be to provide recipes to participants. This is significant considering that most of literacy participants are women, and it is women who do the cooking in the texts. Thus, the assumption may be that the participants will use these recipes at home.

In another paragraph-long passage, readers are introduced to Ülker, a woman who washes the dirty tulle

curtains in a washing machine, dries them on a clothesline, and then irons them. Doing laundry is a quintessentially female household task, a labor-intensive chore in a country where driers are scarce and washing machines have been widely available for only two decades.

Four reading passages depict men as the financial provider in the relationship. In two passages, the men buy the women jewelry; in the third the man is the newlywed husband, and the last indicates nothing about the nature of the relationship. Although buying jewelry does not necessarily mean providing for the family, this activity is significant because none of the reading passages describe women giving valuable objects to men. In the third story, Hayriye convinces her husband to buy a new carpet, stating that it would be embarrassing for guests to see the old one. At first, the husband replies, "We do not need a carpet," but then is convinced because of Hayriye's "explanations." That the husband needed to be persuaded suggests that he had the ultimate authority over household spending.

Even when the women in these passages do provide for themselves financially, they are expected to continue performing unpaid housework. Thus, the text both reflects and reinforces the second shift (Hochschild, 2003), an inequitable division of labor that remains "deeply entrenched" in Turkey (O'Neill & Guler, 2009, p. 171). In a passage about Ferhat, a young woman who works in a textile shop, we learn that when women have a job and contribute economically to the household, they also do the housework. Because the text describes this situation in a matter-of-fact manner, it does not appear to be making a value statement. However, the failure to mention the unequal sexual division of labor—we have no idea what men do once they are home, for instance—implicitly validates this as a natural, fair arrangement.

Similarly, the textbook transmits conventional ideas about what kind of paid work is appropriate for men and women. In "Phone Call," two women talk about a handmade tablecloth. One of the women, an artisan who creates home decorations, writes down the size of the tablecloth being ordered. The association of crafts with women is also evident in a five-sentence passage about Eda and her grandmother, who weave a

kilim (a rug traditionally hand-woven by women). Note that Eda was not described as, say, a shop owner who sells *kilims* to tourists in Istanbul, in which case she would enjoy significantly higher earnings.

The women's informal economic activities contrast sharply with the story of Zeki, a man who, upon completing a literacy class, enrolls in a computer course and, to the surprise of his friends, goes on to "work on computers." We learn at the end of the story that "Zeki now wants to work in a private company." By choosing to portray women as craftspeople, a poorly paid informal economic activity, and men as professionals working in relatively well-paid fields such as technology, these passages tacitly condone gender stratification in economic activities.

In addition to providing financial stability and pursuing professional careers, men are portrayed in the textbook as authority figures, both in and outside of the family. For instance, in a short reading passage about two friends who share their troubles, the female character only listens when the man is talking. After sharing her worries, the female character receives "wisdom" (*ondan akıl aldı*) from him. Although there are passages in which men and women interact, none depicts a female character giving advice to a man.

Finally, by presenting communication as the solution to overcoming troubles in romantic relationships, the literacy primer ignores the systemic gender inequities that give rise to relational problems. For instance, in a passage describing how a woman convinces a man (presumably her partner) to buy a carpet, the last sentence states, "They were both content as they could solve this problem through talking."

The emphasis on communication is more significant in the passage, "Communication in the Family." After stating that "the most important communication in the family is between spouses," the text advises readers to be honest in expressing their feelings; to use tactile communication; to avoid making generalizations, lecturing their spouse, and blaming them in expressing frustrations; to maintain eye contact; and to try to understand each other's viewpoints. Both passages imply that communication skills are the underlying cause of, and solution to, relational problems.

Although communication is important, this focus obscures the social structures that contribute to relational strife. In a country where physical violence against women is common, where women have less decision-making power in the household, where women have primary responsibility for childrearing and domestic work, and where women's sexuality and physical mobility are controlled by men (Parla, 2001), it is unrealistic and misleading to claim that adopting a particular *communication style* would resolve such problems.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The reading passages and images in this curriculum depict not only how the world *is*, but also how it *ought* to be. As such, it transmits ideologies that justify gender hierarchies as natural. Since this is the dominant textbook in Turkish adult literacy programs and the majority of these literacy participants are women, the curriculum shapes how adult learners view masculinity and femininity, childrearing, and gender roles and responsibilities in the family, society, and workplace; how they enact their gender identities; and the kinds of identities they envision for themselves.

The textbook's sexual division of labor Discourse does not challenge gender inequality in the Turkish labor market, as evidenced by women's low rate of participation in the paid labor force (26.1%, Gürsel, Uysal-Kolaşin, & Dincer, 2009) and their longer duration of unemployment compared to men (Gürsel, Darbaz, & Güner, 2009). Although labor market participation studies assume that increasing the number of actively employed women in Turkey would reduce poverty and strengthen the national economy, the textbook we studied depicts a world where women are mainly restricted to the home.

Female earnings in Turkey are considered additional income since men are the main breadwinners (Gürsel, Darbaz, & Güner, 2009). When evaluating a possible job opportunity, women take into account the value of their domestic work, which might be socially preferred to paid work. Lack of affordable childcare makes the situation for urban working women especially difficult. This adult literacy textbook, then, does little to help women imagine new occupational possibilities. Similarly, the Discourse that associates childrearing and caretaking with mothers and discipline with fa-

thers is congruent with existing gender roles and identities in Turkey. Despite recent changes in attitudes among some Turkish women, the dominant view holds women responsible for childcare and housework even when they work outside the home (O'Neill & Guler, 2009). Furthermore, one of the textbook passages suggests that children look up to their fathers, not their mothers, as a legitimate source of authority.

Together, the Discourses in this literacy textbook reinforce prevailing gender ideologies in Turkey, which hold that “men are responsible for family decisions and finances and remain in control while women take care of the house and children regardless of whether or not they are also in the paid work force” (O'Neill & Guler, 2009, p. 171). Regrettably, the textbook does nothing to expose or challenge these ideas. This does not necessarily mean that literacy participants passively accept such messages or that the material is useless, as it could hypothetically be used in classrooms with a critical perspective. Should adult educators wish to question the assumptions about gender in the literacy curriculum and society, this study offers insights that can aid such a critical reading.

The study suggests the following implications:

- Recognize that all the materials (e.g., workbooks, videos, Web sites) used in adult education are inherently political. In other words, they can reinforce and/or challenge society’s widely held beliefs about who men and women should be.
- Critically examine the kinds of gender identities conveyed by the words and images in curricular materials. For instance, how do parenting-related materials depict mothers and fathers? Do the men and women in texts engage in gender stereotyped activities or also in non-traditional ones (e.g., men cooking, women working as engineers)? What kinds of personal qualities are assigned to men and women (e.g., assertive men vs. docile women)?
- Critically examine how these ideals reinforce and/or challenge gender inequality in the family, workplace, education, and other spheres . That is, how do curricular materials open up or foreclose new possibilities for men’s and women’s roles? Do these materials help learners envision how men and women could share power more equitably?

- Provide ample opportunities for learners to reflect on the ideologies presented in the curricular materials, while also using them to teach content. Guide learners in identifying, discussing, and critiquing the notions of gender found in these materials.

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